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Issues of citizenship: coming-into-presence and preserving the difference

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AQ3

A few days before finishing this paper, we attended a small conference in our home town that was organised by a community organisation that supports families in poverty through a multiplicity of projects with children, youth and adults. The actions undertaken by the organisation aim at creating diverse opportunities for the participants to play their role as citizens in the community and in society at large. The organisation manages to create a strong bond with the families in poverty and engages them in activities that are innovative, unconventional, original and sometimes provocative. The conference was the result of a three years project on arts education in which the entire community organisation was involved. The organisers experimented with multiple media: drawing, photographing, knitting, painting, neighbourhood exploration, performance, etc. Sponsoring for the project came from the provincial authorities. The initiative obtained this funding because it promised to engage the participants in a learning process through these practices of arts education.

At the beginning of the conference, the politician responsible in the province for matters of education, equal opportunities and minorities addressed the audience.

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AQ1

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AQ2

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She praised the initiative of the community organisation and emphasised how important it was that opportunities were created, often in difficult circumstances and with non-mainstream participants, to engage in processes of 'lifelong learning'. In her talk, she referred in a nutshell to the main keywords that nowadays inspire the policy discourse on lifelong learning. She pointed to the risk of *individuals* dropping out of present-day society that becomes increasingly complex and knowledge-based. She reminded the audience of the *responsibility of individuals* 'to stay on board' and of the community organisations to '*activate*' them to remain connected to the world of work and to the world of the community. She emphasised the importance of lifelong learning both as a means of flexible adaptation of individuals to the continuously changing circumstances of the knowledge society and as an instrument for policy-makers to guarantee prosperity and cohesion for all. The brief address reflected the extent to which the discourse on lifelong learning is today an integral part of the dominant policy frameworks at various levels. It also reflected how this discourse focuses predominantly on *the promotion of individual social mobility*. This remarkably contrasted with the efforts of the community organisation to frame learning not as an individualised activity but as a joint process of people encountering each other in a creative engagement with the world they live in.

Thirty to 40 years ago, pleas in favour of lifelong or permanent education/learning were still limited to the world of committed researchers in the departments of adult and continuing education at the universities and to some isolated yet visionary policy makers. Today the discourse of lifelong learning has penetrated diverse spheres of society. A major consensus seems to have been established that all (Western) societies should become 'learning societies'. Over time, however, the reflections on lifelong learning have taken a particular direction. Today they focus mainly on the responsibilities of individuals to remain competent so as to keep up with the changes taking place in the surrounding world. Moreover, the discourse of lifelong learning is mainly inspired by an economic agenda (reinforcing human capital in order to remain competitive individually and collectively) and a social cohesion agenda (prevent a further disintegration of the social fabric). In short, the critical perspective on lifelong education/learning has been increasingly substituted by a functionalist one.

The report *Learning Through Life: An inquiry into the future of lifelong learning* (Schuller and Watson 2009) is no exception. It reflects the above-mentioned consensus that emancipation today will be the result of a continuous ambition of individuals to vividly respond to the new demands of the economy, the workforce, the market and civil society. According to the authors of the report, the responsibility of the policy-makers is to offer a framework that enables these individuals to 'stay on board', as the politician of our province expressed it at the occasion of her address. No reference whatsoever is made to the fact that today again, millions of people are being pushed off the boat into the insecurities of a welfare state that is increasingly under pressure. The omnipresent emphasis on individual social mobility in policy discourses and policy reports today neglects the antagonisms and the continuous struggle for hegemony that direct our lives and our policies. It therefore matters, for academics, for practitioners and for politicians, not to let adult and continuing education be reduced exclusively to the promotion of individual social mobility through lifelong learning.

In our paper, we explore further how this functionalist and reductionist turn in (adult) education has come about and how we could try to conceive of concepts of

democratic citizenship and education that create new perspectives on how to deal with important challenges of society today. The exploration is inspired by international literature but also by authors who may be perceived in the UK context as typical representatives of continental thinking and even as local voices from Belgium and the Netherlands.

Active citizenship: enhancing social cohesion

In the past decade, the issue of *community building* has become an important social theme. Researchers and policy-makers share a concern about an observed loss of social cohesion. In the field of social sciences, the American political scientist Robert Putnam achieved worldwide fame with his book *Bowling Alone: The collapse and revival of American community* (2000), which convinced many readers that our sense of community is being eroded. Putnam argues that over the past few decades, associational life in the US has steadily lost ground. People no longer become involved, they spend lonely hours in front of the television and are largely self-absorbed. Traditional membership of various associations such as sports clubs, parent committees, service clubs, church communities and youth organisations used to ensure that people felt involved in the local community and, by extension, in society at large. The steady decline in civic engagement causes the social fabric to unravel and trust in society to decline, Putnam argues. Such trust can only develop when people are connected, maintain regular contacts and collaborate with each other. This does not only involve ties with like-minded people (bonding), but also the collaboration with people and associations outside one's circle of confidants (bridging). The trust emerging from these processes of bonding and bridging represents a society's 'social capital' (Field 2003)—'[t]he glue that holds society together' (Putnam 2000).

Many authors dealing with the issue of *social capital* are rather pessimistic about present-day social developments and call for a renewal of the social fabric. This is also the position adopted by the Belgian sociologist Mark Elchardus (2002) and his research group, who have been monitoring societal trends for many years. Elchardus has applied Putnam's ideas to his own research, reaching similar conclusions. Flemish society is undergoing radical transformation. Traditional 'pillarised' associational structures are being dismantled. This 'civil society' used to be an important component of society's social fabric. For the time being, it remains unclear by what it will be replaced, but according to Elchardus and his research team, one obvious observation that can be made is that television has started to monopolise many people's leisure time. And people whose worldview is informed by commercial media are at risk of becoming isolated and bitter (Elchardus 2002).

Another authority on this issue is Paul Scheffer (2007), a Dutch author. He relates the issue of social cohesion to the challenges posed by the *multicultural society*, arguing that our society is currently facing a 'multicultural tragedy'. The ethnic/cultural mix of a country such as the Netherlands (or Belgium) has radically altered in the past decades. Policy-makers have shown too little concern for this. They have mainly been inspired by the views of multiculturalists who, according to Scheffer, applaud cultural diversity while ignoring that large groups of newcomers hardly develop ties with 'the country of arrival', do not understand the language or the culture and sometimes even take a hostile attitude towards the host country and its

cultural traditions. The non-committal answer given by multiculturalism is that there is no 'we' anymore; instead, society consists of a collection of subcultures. It is hard to see what remains of the notion of citizenship. Without a sense of 'we' nothing is possible, without critical involvement, society disintegrates' (Scheffer 2007: 405). The author notes that the disintegration of the social fabric in the multicultural society is not merely a social problem. It is also a political problem because it poses a threat to democracy:

> 'Many have resisted black-and-white thinking in terms of 'them' and 'us' and have concluded that if the notion of 'them' was rejected, we might as well dispose of 'us' at the same time. However, while this shows a certain consistency, it cannot be denied in a democracy that without a sense of 'us', without an imagined community, there is no shared responsibility for the wellbeing of society (Scheffer 2007: 407).

Politicians from diverse, traditionally democratic parties have adopted this message, sharing a concern about citizenship and democracy. They are under pressure from right-wing populist movements that are openly intolerant, both towards newcomers and towards the ruling political elite. These politicians attribute the developments described above to the growing bitterness in society and are searching for instruments to counter this trend. Hence, social and cultural organisations are instructed to promote community building. Neighbourhood and street parties, considered old-fashioned a decade ago, are being encouraged again. For the Minister of Culture, 'participation' is a central policy option. Even the arts sector is being encouraged to address a wider audience and to contribute to the *strengthening of the social fabric*. Such initiatives are not always favourably received within the critical arts world. Attempts are being made to meet the challenges posed by policy-makers, and as could be expected, responses vary widely. Some artists are eager to contribute. A few years ago, for instance, the 'Civil Society Parliament' was established with a view to promoting social cohesion. The cultural avant-garde, on the other hand, sometimes reacts irritably, wishing to maintain its autonomy and the freedom to experiment and innovate. These artists consider it their mission to explore new ways of living and forms of expression and they blame policy-makers for indulging in nostalgia and romanticising the past.

It is indeed striking how the solutions proposed to address the disintegration of the social fabric often seem to draw on the past. Contemporary forms of interaction and communication via the internet and mobile phones barely feature in this debate. As early as 1995, when the debate on 'values and norms' arose in the Netherlands, Jos van der Lans (a Dutch opinion-maker) made the following critical remarks:

> By now, everyone is familiar with the doom and gloom stories about the destruction wrought by progress in our society…: the sense of community has disappeared, traditional family ties have broken down, people no longer pay attention to each other and close-knit neighbourhoods have disintegrated.… Lots of things have been destroyed and lost (van der Lans 1995: 31).

Nevertheless, van der Lans argues, we shouldn't be overly pessimistic, as can be inferred from the way in which new media serve to maintain and strengthen the social fabric.

> At the same time, some nine billion telephone conversations took place in the Netherlands in 1992.… How many of these conversations involved care and love? In how many conversations did we cheer each other up? How often did we say: 'Don't worry' or 'Why don't you sleep on it?' In how many conversations did we say 'Give me a ring if you need anything'? (Van der Lans 1995: 32).

That was 1995. Since then, we have witnessed the explosion of internet contacts and new phenomena such as Facebook. It is certainly worth wondering, as van der Lans does, whether these new media are not promoting mutual engagement and providing creative opportunities for citizenship.

As a result of this growing concern, both nationally and internationally, from a scientific as well as from a political perspective, the notion of 'active citizenship' has been foregrounded. Frequently, this notion is interpreted in a functionalist sense, whereby citizens are expected to actively (learn to) adapt to and engage in the evolving societal context. (Karseras *et al.* 2005) This context itself is barely questioned, as is illustrated by the view held by the European Commission (Commission of the European Union 1998) on the meaning of active citizenship. According to the Commission, active citizenship practices should contribute to the development of the knowledge society. Moreover, there is a strong emphasis on the promotion of cohesion against the background of increasingly diverse nation states in a globalised world. To a certain extent, European governing bodies thus share the concerns of the researchers mentioned above.

> The concept of active citizenship ultimately speaks to the extent to which individuals and groups feel a sense of attachment to the societies and communities to which they theoretically belong, and is therefore closely related to the promotion of social inclusion and cohesion as well as to matters of identity and values. (Commission of the European Union 1998)

AQ6

Absent from this discussion is a more 'critical' approach to active citizenship (Karseras *et al.* 2005), which would also question the nature and quality of the society into which citizens are to be included.

Active citizenship: a function of social cohesion

Many authors distinguish between two approaches to citizenship, i.e. 'citizenship as status' and 'citizenship as practice (Johnston 2005). '*Citizenship as status',* a notion based on Marshall's traditional concept of 'social citizenship' as well as on a number of communitarian views of identity, is primarily associated with the rights and duties inherent in the membership of a particular community. When asylum seekers gain citizen 'status', they are entitled to reside in the community (in this case, the nation state) and to make use of its facilities. At the same time, they are expected to obey the law, to contribute to social security as far as possible, to pay taxes, etc. *Citizenship as practice,* on the other hand, is a less formal and hence more dynamic concept. It is closely related to actions and attitudes connected with active forms of participation in society, such as participating in socio-cultural practices or in more radical democratic practices. For instance, when the presidents of a few Flemish universities provide temporary accommodation to asylum seekers, thereby signalling to the

government that they disagree with the drawn-out verification process, this can be called citizenship-as-practice.

To a certain extent, this dichotomy also informs European policy-makers' approach to *active citizenship*. Citizenship is primarily associated with individuals' ability to function in an increasingly complex, diverse and ambiguous society that demands more and more from its citizens in terms of knowledge, attitudes and skills:

> The potential for practising active citizenship is structured in the first instance by a network of civic, social and political rights and entitlements, which, in the modern era, have gradually become more comprehensive in nature and have been extended to wider groups of people living in the jurisdiction of a given territory—in practice, most significantly that of the modern nation state (Commission of the European Union 1998). AQ6

This passage clearly deals with 'citizenship as status', more particularly the ability to participate in society, on the basis of civil rights and entitlements. In addition, 'citizenship as practice' is also referred to, but only in a conditional sense. To be able to engage in occasionally conflicting civic practices, individuals need to be empowered to handle diversity and conflict in everyday life. 'The practice of active citizenship is therefore a question of being empowered to handle the practice of democratic culture, and feeling that one has a stake in getting involved in the communities in which one lives, whether by choice or force of circumstance' (Commission of the European Union 1998).

Thus, it seems that policy-makers largely associate 'active citizenship' with particular sets of knowledge, skills and attitudes that enable people to participate in a society in which citizenship is no longer a static entity but a matter of fluid, dynamic and negotiated identities. At the same time, it seems that, in this case, citizenship is considered as 'method' rather than as 'content'. In this approach, the inclusion of *all* citizens is a major concern, in the sense that everyone should be able to function autonomously, creatively, in collaboration with others, as the 'architect of one's own life' (Beck 1986).

> In this context, the practice of citizenship becomes more like a method of social inclusion, in the course of which people together create the experience of becoming the architects and actors of their own lives. Opportunities to learn and practise autonomy, responsibility, co-operation and creativity enable the development of a sense of personal worth and of expertise in confronting and tolerating ambiguities and oppositions. (Beck 1986) AQ7

Along the same lines, citizenship learning is often reduced to a fairly formal matter. Thus, Biesta (2006) describes citizenship learning in terms of 'citizenship-as-outcome', which is comparable to 'citizenship as status'. He considers this a static approach that views citizenship as the outcome of a developmental and educational trajectory. As such, citizenship is largely conceptualised from an instrumental perspective on the role of upbringing and education. The main question raised is how particular sets of knowledge, skills and dispositions can be taught to diverse groups of people in the most effective and efficient way. Citizenship learning is hereby reduced to a sort of 'production process' resulting in the creation of

citizenship. Again, citizenship learning is thus narrowed to its methodological aspects. 'Pedagogically, the main problem with the idea of citizenship-as-outcome is that democratic citizenship is regarded as a status that is only reached *after* one has completed a particular developmental and educational trajectory. This places the young person in the awkward position of not yet being a citizen' (Biesta 2006: 55). Similar to Johnston (2005), Biesta opposes 'citizenship-as-outcome' to 'citizenship-as-practice,' starting from the observation that many (young) people participate in various citizenship practices on a daily basis: at school, in their sports club or youth movement. 'The point is that young people learn just as much about democracy and citizenship from the democratic and undemocratic experiences encountered in their day-to-day lives as from the official citizenship curriculum' (Biesta 2006: 56). Citizenship-as-practice primarily concerns situations where young people actually experience democratic participation. 'If young people's everyday lifeworld does not present opportunities for real participation, then it doesn't make much sense to organise citizenship classes designed to transform young people into active en responsible citizens' (ibid.: 56).

This problem is not confined to the education of young people. As argued by Bouverne-De Bie *et al.* (2006), a similar reduction of content to method manifests itself in the field of adult education. These authors highlight how adult education practices have been instrumentalised by a policy obsessed with the reconstruction of social cohesion. 'Associational life risks being viewed as merely instrumental in the fight against bitterness—an instrument to hold society together' (Bouverne-De Bie et al. 2006: 126). This development, these authors suggest, has been triggered by the disappearance of ideological controversies inherent in a 'pillarised' society. Since then, the socio-cultural sector has derived its identity from methods, rather than from values, ideas and ideologies. It seems difficult, however, to build a community purely on the basis on principles of method. Possibly, this explains the limited attention this sector is currently receiving in the public forum.

> People and media are primarily interested in an organisation's societal goals. Both the demise of 'pillarised' society and the doctrine of government neutrality…reinforce the tendency to avoid discussing the societal goals of adult education practices. This might lay bare the differences between organisations, which are now concealed under the methodological surface. (Bouverne-De Bie *et al.* 2006: 126)

The observation of a shift from content to method, or from goals to instruments, as noted by both Biesta and Bouverne-De Bie *et al.*, is very convincing. On the other hand, I do not completely agree with Biesta's claim that the methodological aspect only concerns the learning of 'citizenship-as-outcome' (citizenship-as-status). I would argue that the reduction of content to method involves a radical shift within the method itself. Thus, the distinction between 'formal' and 'non-formal' education has grown increasingly blurry. In recent decades, many formal academic practices have become more informal, a development supported by constructivist insights. Rogers (2004) calls this phenomenon 'flexible schooling'. Emphasis has shifted from learning specific contents to 'learning how to learn', partly because it has become impossible to determine exactly what needs to be learned, since this is subject to constant change. Hence, more flexible practices of knowledge acquisition have been introduced which are less geared towards the traditional transmission of

existing knowledge. Instead, they create opportunities for a 'negotiated curriculum' and for methodological variation whereby processes of problem and project-driven learning play an important role. In other words, in the educational sector a fundamental change is taking place, i.e. from '*learning as acquisition*', involving the acquisition of a relatively stable set (a canon) of contents, skills and attitudes, to '*learning as participation'*, where learning is embedded in practice-related, mostly team-based, activities (Sfard 1998).

With regard to citizenship as well, a shift from citizenship-as-status to citizenship-as-practice seems to become manifest. Given the continuous changes that the nation state is undergoing, it is becoming more and more difficult to offer a precise definition of citizenship. This is why policy-makers' mission statements tend to narrow down the concept of citizenship to its methodological aspects. Increasingly, active citizenship is described in terms of a lifelong learning process. However, as citizenship is hard to define, methodological aspects tend to be interpreted in terms of citizenship-as-practice rather than citizenship-as-status/outcome:

> The practice of active citizenship is thus focused on the process of critical reflection, and is not automatically pre-structured by a fixed list of norms and values. It is evident that under these circumstances, learning for citizenship is not an optional extra but is an integral part of the concept and practice of modern citizenship altogether. (Commission of the European Union 1998) AQ8

A mission statement is of course always different from day-to-day practice. And Biesta is undoubtedly correct in claiming that many educational practices (he refers to British school practices) still emphasise 'citizenship-as-outcome' and hence 'learning-as-acquisition'. Let's take it as a given that in practice these two perspectives on citizenship and the associated learning often merge, making it difficult to draw clear boundaries. The main point to be observed concerns the reduction to method, whether in its more static or its more dynamic version. Nevertheless, I would like to offer a comment here. Paradoxically, the reduction to method is not entirely without content. 'Active citizenship' also contains an agenda, which is apparent, for instance, in the previously cited quotation from the European Commission, describing the practice of citizenship as a 'method of social inclusion', which teaches citizens to gain and sustain a place in a society constantly in flux. Such an interpretation of citizenship indeed suggests that the method has become the content. But it is also remarkable that society as such is not being questioned. The 'constantly changing society', in which everyone who has obtained citizen status should find a place, or in other words achieve social inclusion, is considered self-evident. The fact that the same society also excludes people, unevenly distributes opportunities for participation, depletes natural resources, causes suffering by irresponsible financial speculation, pushes people 'off the boat' etc. is not mentioned. Active citizenship thus equals taking control of one's own life with a view to active participation in society. Such a view of active citizenship is characteristic of a functionalist discourse. Society needs individuals willing to contribute actively and creatively to the development of society in all its aspects and to take responsibility for their personal growth. The contrasts, tensions, dilemmas and conflicts inherent in this society remain unproblematic. If we wish to relate these issues to citizenship, the term 'democratic citizenship' is more relevant than 'active citizenship', because the notion of democracy enables us to critically consider contrasts, conflicts and dilemmas.

Democratic citizenship: a critique of injustice and supremacy

According to Mouffe (2005), the scant attention paid to these contrasts within functionalist discourse can be attributed to the fact that the existing social order is construed as a more or less 'natural order'. To clarify this, she distinguishes between the concepts of 'the social' and 'the political'. *The realm of the social* involves sedimented practices, i.e. practices organising and arranging social life in a self-evident manner. People tend to accept these practices as a natural given. 'What is at a given moment considered a "natural order"—jointly with the common sense which accompanies it – is the result of sedimented practices' (Mouffe 2005: 18). Sedimented practices allow people to attune their behaviour to each other, to arrange social interaction, to accept existing social ties. That is why every society needs such practices. They create order and a certain measure of predictability and trust. They also form the basis of social integration.

As such practices are largely self-evident, it is not always apparent that they often result from previously taken decisions based on existing balances of power. As Mouffe argues, *the realm of the political* centres on choices involving contrasting options, dilemmas or conflicts. In this process, power, i.e. the ability to influence particular choices, obviously plays an important role. Mouffe terms such attempts to influence choices 'hegemonic interventions', i.e. interventions through which superiority is asserted. For this reason, Mouffe argues, the political is 'antagonistic', or characterised by conflict. This conflict revolves around various hegemonic claims. It is not always easy to distinguish the realm of the social and the realm of the political, as they are closely intertwined. That is why many social institutions and events have a political dimension. This implies that elements of struggle and power also play a role in the realm of the social. 'Power is constitutive of the social because the social could not exist without the power relations through which it is given shape' (Mouffe 2005: 18). Because every social order also has a political dimension, it inevitably contains forms of exclusion. Certain possibilities are always repressed or may be activated if the balance of power shifts or as the result of 'counter hegemonic practices'.

Citizenship practices, whether these concern citizenship-as-status or citizenship-as-practice, are also examples of sedimented practices. They have a political dimension, because, apart from a social integration dimension, they also reflect certain power relations. The way in which we structure our education system, organise traffic, plan public space, shape our cities, activate the unemployed or combat poverty is determined by hegemonic interventions. Clearly, it is crucial, especially for those who stand to gain from them, that such decisions are accepted or recognised as legitimate. And decisions acquire legitimacy when they appear inevitable or 'natural'. It is therefore in the interests of the proponents of particular decisions that their views are accepted as 'common sense'. This requires persuasive power. Opponents, on the other hand, will try to ensure that the 'political' nature of these decisions remains apparent. Hence, those in favour of nuclear power plants will point out the economic, technological and even ecological inevitability of their position, as illustrated by the controversial media campaign launched by the nuclear energy lobby, which highlighted the environmental benefits of nuclear energy. Opponents will tend to promote environmentally friendly alternatives, thus constructing a counter-hegemonic discourse. Both sides will rely on scientific arguments to support the 'objectivity' of certain choices and convictions.

In this example, the 'political' nature of the debate is fairly obvious, partly because it is a controversial public issue. In other social practices, this is much less clear, because they are a relatively uncontested part of *common sense*. 'Common sense refers to the unproblematic patterns of interpretation that incorporate a deep familiarity with a certain social and natural world. "Unproblematic" means that this embodied knowledge does not function as a "hypothesis" or "representation" but rather as a direct understanding' (Van Leeuwen 2008).

In many cases, these convictions are supported by a more comprehensive discourse whose elements are 'logically' coherent. This is an 'impression (a discourse, vocabulary, horizon) which constitutes me as a subject and the other as the other', as suggested by Visker (2007: 22). And this 'impression' is like 'a mark which identifies me in a manner beyond my control and which I cannot discover because I cannot transcend it' (Visker 2007: 22). Bauman (1995, in Biesta 2005) AQ9
gives the example of the discourse of the *'rational community'*. In this discourse, AQ10
contemporary society is presented as a modern society, based on the rational principles of science and technology. These principles shape the development of society and to a certain extent also serve as a norm for (political) decisions. If such political decisions are informed by scientific and technological insights, they seem 'natural' and superior. Everything that deviates from these principles is perceived as 'irrational' or at least strange. According to Bauman, this is also the way in which we approach strangers. He suggests that every community creates its own strangers. Thus, the rational community labels those representing other principles, values or traditions as 'foreign'. And this rational community, Bauman suggests, has always had two ways of dealing with strangers. Strangers are either assimilated into the community, their difference is eradicated and they become part of modern self-evidence. Or they are excluded or banished to the margins of the 'orderly' world. Frequently, this even leads to physical destruction. The only option that is not considered, according to Bauman, is that of permanent co-existence with the stranger.

The metaphor of the rational community helps us understand how 'the political' remains hidden in contemporary society. The solutions prescribed by the rational community are represented as the outcome of rational considerations by experts who are not led by subjective preferences, self-interest or power but by expert knowledge. In this kind of 'knowledge society', the solutions to problems inevitably caused by the complexity of society are presented as the result of expertise, which enables us to transcend the oppositions arising from divergent value orientations, ideologies or interests. According to this view, we have evolved to a society 'beyond left and right' (Giddens 1998). This transcendence of old oppositions heralds a new radical politics which, as Mouffe (2005) argues, depoliticises the political. She is concerned that such analyses may remove any trace of opposition or antagonism from the political, which is thus reduced to 'politics' or policy. 'It is for this reason that we should be very wary of the current tendency to celebrate a politics of consensus, claiming that is has replaced the supposedly old-fashioned adversarial politics of right and left' (Mouffe 2005: 30). She also cautions against a concept of democracy in which 'consensus-oriented dialogues' between citizens and experts are expected to provide reflection-based solutions to the challenges inevitably facing us. In such a view, democracy is stripped of its aspects of struggle, affection and passion. Instead, Mouffe suggests, the centrality of 'conflict' should be preserved in our democratic practices. This is what she terms the 'agonistic' dimension of democracy. 'My claim

is that, thanks to the idea of the "adversary", the agonistic approach that I am proposing could contribute to a revitalisation and deepening of democracy'. (Mouffe 2005: 32) Such an agonistic democracy concept recognises the contingent nature of certain hegemonic articulations. This means that the choices we make are not imperative or inevitable and that they can be questioned, along with the power relations underpinning them. Mouffe's account allows us to comment on a number of previously made observations. For instance, the observation that many socio-cultural practices narrowly focus on method at the expense of content, skirting the discussion of values, goals and ideologies. Presumably, this ties in with our observations on the nature of 'the rational community and, along the same lines, the tendency to interpret democratic practices as consensus-oriented dialogues. Doesn't this also mean that these socio-cultural organisations subscribe to this logic, thereby losing sight of the unavoidably political nature of many social practices? One could wonder why this is the case. A quarter of a century ago, the socio-cultural sector still considered the critique of social injustice as one of its key tasks. In contrast, Kunneman (1996) finds that these days, culture and welfare professionals position themselves as experts addressing social problems from a technical-professional input-output perspective that he characterises as the 'toaster model':

> Following the politicisation and emancipatory discourse characteristic of the seventies…the focus on method and a methodological approach was strengthened by a series of cost cuts and by the steady advance of the toaster model, which increased the pressure to justify the quality and productivity of one's own professional activities. (Kunneman 1996: 254)

This causes these professionals to lose sight of the fact that many issues related to their professional activities also have a strong political dimension, in the sense defined by Mouffe. Kunneman calls this dimension '*normative professionalism'* and describes it as 'a reflexive attitude towards one's own professional activities, more particularly a reflexive attitude towards the interference of strategic fields of power and potentialities of individuation within one's own professional activities' (ibid.: 243). This implies that professionals reflect on how their own professional activities are situated within what Mouffe calls the 'hegemonic power field'.

However, it is questionable whether democratic citizenship can only be conceptualised in terms of 'antagonism'. Doesn't this inevitably lead to 'us versus them' schemes, in other words to inclusion and exclusion schemes? And since the political and the social are so closely intertwined, doesn't this view imply that all social relations are inevitably permeated by enemy images? Does Mouffe not emphasise (ant)agonism too strongly? Isn't she losing sight of the fact that social as well as political relations, while inevitably conflict-ridden, always contain a certain degree of solidarity? Does the conceptualisation of 'the political' necessitate the construction of enemy images? In other words, doesn't democratic citizenship also include a dimension of *solidarity* with others who do not share our interests, perspectives or views?

In an interesting comment on Mouffe 's account of antagonism as the fundamental category of the political, Fritsch (2008) provides a partial answer to these questions. Following Derrida, he argues that the boundaries between identities are not only marked by 'adversaries' as Mouffe emphasises, but also by forms of 'strangeness' (*différance*) that do not necessarily need to be considered in terms of conflict, struggle or antagonism. For this reason, the boundaries between inside and outside,

between 'us' and 'them' are endlessly permeable and opaque. 'Us and 'them' are permeable categories. The other and the self constitute each other. This also implies that the self and the other are continuously subject to displacement and to renegotiation. As Fritsch maintains, despite the inevitable oppositions, democratic citizenship requires solidarity, a community, albeit a *'community without community'* (Derrida). 'As a result, every political identity, every citizenship, and every social relation, no matter how antagonistic, can only be thought on the basis of a prior affirmation, consent, promise and friendship. To be sure, such an originary relation is not egalitarian and not reciprocal but, rather dissymetrical and forever nontransparent. But it does hint at the duplicity of social and political relations: needing the other but disavowing the need, the self is also obligated to the other and to the other others'. (Fritsch 2008: 195).

AQ13,14

Issues of citizenship: coming-into-presence and preserving the difference

In the course of this exploration of concepts of citizenship, comprising *active citizenship as a function of social cohesion* on the one hand and *democratic citizenship as a critique of injustice* on the other hand, we have frequently encountered the issue of identity. Increasingly, identity is emerging as a social construct closely connected to one's identification with 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1991). This imagined reality of who one is, to which group one belongs, and who does not belong, is constructed within a (power)game of mutual naming and renaming (Wildemeersch 1992). With regard to this issue of identity, another dichotomy emerges, i.e. between a *strong identity* on the one hand and *a permeable identity* on the other hand. Advocates of a strong identity are motivated by diverse reasons. Authors such as Putnam, Elchardus and Scheffer are in favour of a strong identity with a view to promoting social cohesion. In this view, the creation of a strong identity equals the creation of a sense of 'us' within a close-knit community (local, national or even supra-national), which is designed to counter the disintegration of social ties and the growing individualism and bitterness. Their emphasis is on the social rather than on the political. Within this framework, democracy is mainly associated with the creation of a consensus, reached on rational grounds, after weighing pros and cons and involving neutral, distant observers. An author such as Mouffe, on the other hand, strongly emphasises the struggle involved in the discussion of important social issues. She considers democracy as a 'public agonistic space' where dissent is never resolved by consensus. Any agreement between adversaries is only viewed as the result of a (temporary) compromise. An instrument in this struggle is the creation of a strong identity or a strongly polarised sense of 'us' versus 'them'. This is a passionate affair, with affections and emotions strongly contributing to a feeling of self-worth.

On the other hand, some authors question the need for a strong identity, emphasising instead the ambiguity of identity. The boundary between self and other is a permeable one, making it hard to differentiate between inside and outside. The inside (the I, the we) is simultaneously constituted by the outside (the other, the stranger). The other is in me, I am in the other. Fritsch follows Derrida, who posits that '[t]he outside bears with the inside a relationship that is, as usual, anything but simple exteriority. The meaning of the outside was always present within the inside, imprisoned outside the outside and vice versa (Derrida in Fritsch

AQ15 2008: 182). A similar line of reasoning is adopted by Visker (2007), who challenges the view of a strong identity or an autonomous self. The self is what he calls 'decentred'. It is not autonomous because it does not even understand itself: it is a stranger to itself. The search for a strong identity is merely a feeble attempt to 'immunise' oneself against the other (Masschelein and Simons 2003), by excluding strangeness and projecting it on the other. This deficit—the lack of access to oneself—is not necessarily an incapacity. On the contrary, 'it is *the positive condition* for a singularity with which I do not coincide, but which tears me apart: I am decentred vis-à-vis something which can only singularise me, *because* and *insofar* as it withdraws itself from meaning. This 'something' is meaningful: it is *of* meaning, but AQ16 therefore it is situated beyond the register of meaning' (Visker 2007: 23–24).

Hence, this is not a question of 'identity', but of '*singularisation*' in the sense of becoming a singular person searching for an individual, unique response to the 'dispossession' resulting from the confrontation with the stranger—the other, with what is hard to understand—let alone accept. And it is in searching for and particularly in finding an answer that a person becomes singular or irreplaceable. This process has been described by the metaphor of *wandering*:

> When wandering we are travelling, without knowing where we will end up. On the way, we may meet other travellers, who we are perhaps suspicious of because we don't understand their language and signs. If we do manage to communicate with them, they ask us who we are and where we are going. They ask us to justify ourselves. In the stories we tell them about our experiences, our journey acquires meaning and significance, not only for the strangers, but also for ourselves. (Wildemeersch 1992: 234)

In line with Visker, I would add that this meaning and significance is only a provisional answer; that our sense of alienation can only be partly and temporarily lifted, until we encounter a different strangeness, within and beyond ourselves. And this continues to create discomfort. It constrains and frightens us. Visker calls this 'the terror of the invisible'.

> To conquer that terror, I think, we need outside support. From an outside which makes visible that which remains invisible to me. Because this outside is beyond me, it allows me to spatialise, situate something which can otherwise not be given a place. I can attempt to give it presence, to place it outside myself, to represent it. (Visker 2007: 26)

Experiencing discomfort, making the other visible, coming into presence, spatialising something, making it public, showing it to others.

> The public sphere enables me to move beyond something that makes me irreplaceable but that also constrains me. Not because it allows me to show to others what remains invisible to myself—at best, what those others see is the meaning rather than what makes it meaningful. But because the public can give a presence to what I could not re-present for myself. (Visker 2007: 28).

Other authors also question the view that we can only be ourselves by building a 'strong identity'. According to Biesta (2005), this is not what education is about.

Instead, he would also argue that education is primarily about 'responding': 'in a troubling space which challenges me, questions me, confronts me with what is foreign, disrupts my own self-evidence'. This is what makes me unique and irreplaceable. 'What makes me unique in this assignation, what singularises me, what "makes" me into a unique, singular being, is not my identity, is not a set of attributes that only belongs to me, but the fact that *I* am responsible and that *I* cannot slip away from this assignation. In this view, a unique person, or a unique citizen in the context of this paper, is someone who does not exclude the other in the search for a strong identity, but rather someone who *preserves the difference*. And this again evokes the image of 'bringing something into the open' something that constrains me, that bewilders me. Biesta describes this as 'coming into presence'. 'Coming into presence is, therefore, a presentation to others who are not like us. It is a presentation…to a community "without the essence of a community"…a community…of those who have nothing in common' (Biesta 2005: 49). No community, therefore, with a strong identity. Instead, citizenship means coming into presence in the public space of 'mutual encounter and contradiction' (Bouverne-De Bie 2006: 132). But it is more than merely coming into presence. Citizenship essentially involves the confrontation with issues that simultaneously matter to us and bewilder us: issues that raise dilemmas, issues that we cannot immunise by technical rationality and expertise, issues that require a normative approach and that confront us with the power claims which are inherent in the political and which necessitate agonistic practices.

Conclusion

In our contribution, we departed from the observation that today the academic and political reflection on education is dominated by the discourse on lifelong learning. We noticed that this discourse, as presented in EU documents and exemplified in the NIACE report *Learning Through Life* is mainly functionalist and reductionist. It is functionalist because it concentrates on how the individual can best be integrated into society through processes of lifelong learning. It is reductionist because broad educative processes, which are basically relational, are narrowed down to processes that take place within individuals. We argued that the language of the report mainly reproduces and reinforces this functionalist and reductionist discourse, not only on lifelong learning but also yet more implicitly on citizenship. In the report, the citizen is constructed as someone who, throughout life, 'capitalises' on individual capabilities. In line with this, society is understood as the sum total of individuals all investing in their trajectories of individual social mobility. They do so by taking maximum advantage of policy frameworks such as *Learning Through Life* are supposed to offer. We have argued that this view presents a fairly incomplete picture of what citizenship is about. In reply, we have explored how we could conceptualise citizenship today, not so much in terms of 'active' citizenship but rather in terms of 'democratic' citizenship. In our view, citizenship is not exclusively, nor primarily, about the concern of individual mobility. Citizenship mainly raises the question on how and under what conditions we can 'live together', or how we can deal with plurality and difference in present day society. And, learning to maximise your capabilities throughout life is not necessarily the exclusive way to learn that.

What is lacking therefore in the NIACE framework is a view on democracy, including a perspective on how citizenship is an integral part of democratic practices. In line with this, we further explored what democracy could mean today. We pointed to the relevance of notions such as dissent, antagonism and agonism. These notions helped us to interpret democracy, not as a space characterised by consensus, but as a space where dissent can be articulated; a space of plurality and difference where people can come into the world by responding to matters that not only relate to their private concerns, but to matters of public concern. This perspective on democracy helps us to conceive of education/learning not only as a way for individuals to adapt efficiently to the rapid changes that challenge them, but rather as a 'space' where public issues can be addressed, or where matters that tend to be privatised (such as lifelong learning) can be turned into issues of public concern. Issues of public concern are characterised by debate, by a plurality of opinions and by contradiction and dilemma. Our society today faces many such issues. However, the discourse on lifelong learning as presented in the NIACE report *Learning Through Life* seems to have diverted (adult and continuing) education from such matters of public concern. Our contribution has tried to open perspectives on how education may again obtain a 'critical' role in a democratic society and hence may support people to 'come into presence' in a world where they are not only challenged to capitalise their own potentialities but where they are invited to respond to issues that matter to us all.

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